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What Could Castro Have Known?

There has been recurring speculation that the Soviet Union and/or Cuba dispatched Lee Harvey Oswald on his mission to assassinate President John F. Kennedy. Recently, in connection with the investigation of CIA, renewed currency has been given the speculation that Fidel Castro ordered President Kennedy's assassination in retaliation for plans to assassinate him. This is tied to reports that CIA planned Castro's assassination, followed by the speculation that Castro learned of it and that this provided the motivation for the events that followed.

The fact is that CIA did plan Castro's assassination in the early 1960s, and the purpose of this paper is to consider what Castro could have learned about the planning that actually took the form of attempts to mount an operation against him. This paper necessarily is speculative, as are the suggestions of a cause-and-effect relationship between the plans and President Kennedy's death, but there are some facts on which to base consideration of the question.

One factor that contributes to the difficulty of this speculative paper is the atmosphere in the Cuban exile community in the Miami area. There were a number of emigre groups organized for the general purpose of action against the Castro regime. They all

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looked to the time that would follow Castro's fall, and they talked and planned for it. In the meanwhile they conducted independent forays into Cuba. There was competition for primacy among these groups, and it was not unusual for them to claim CIA support -- whether they had it or not -- and it is certain that there was little understatement in their description of their plans or their claims of achievements. Among the things they said -- undoubtedly reported to Castro by the Cuban intelligence service, which had penetrated the emigre community -- was talk of plans against Castro himself. The form that these reports took when they reached Castro cannot be stated with any certainty, but the fact must be accepted that such information was reported to him, unrelated though it was to actual plans of CIA.

September 1960 - May 1961

The first recorded CIA plan to attempt the assassination of Castro relied on the criminal Syndicate, which had access to Cuba where its gambling business was still operating. A Syndicate member from Los Angeles -- who remained active in this operation through mid-1963 -- arranged an introduction to the head of the Cuban gambling interests through a member of the Chicago Syndicate. The representative of the Cuban gambling interests selected to carry out the mission, a man who had access to Castro by virtue of his position in the Office of the Prime Minister.

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Poison pills were transported to Cuba in late February or March 1961, and delivered to the man who was to administer them. That man, however, had already lost his position with the Prime Minister's office and returned the pills after a couple of weeks. On 11 April 1961 he took refuge in the Venezuelan Embassy, later becoming the responsibility of the Mexican Embassy when Venezuela broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in November 1961. The man was denied a safe conduct pass out of Cuba until October 1964, when he was allowed to leave for Mexico City.

Comment: It is unlikely that the man who was to have administered the poison to Castro revealed his part in the plot for practical considerations of personal safety.

Further, it is unlikely that the Syndicate members engaged in loose talk that might have resulted in a leak concerning the plan.

At the time only a few knew of the plans, and it served their purpose to not disclose the information.

In March-April 1961 the Syndicate representative identified a Cuban exile, the leader of one of the groups in Miami supported by CIA as part of the larger Cuban operation. This man was understood to be dissatisfied with the extent of the support to his group

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and was receptive when approached by a Syndicate representative, possibly already known to him, who told him that he had clients who would pay big money to have Castro done away with. The exile leader previously had been in touch with criminal elements interested in Anti-Castro activities and the cover story would have been credible to him. The Los Angeles member of the Syndicate took over this contact, and delivered the pills to him. The exile leader was believed to have an asset inside Cuba who worked in a restaurant frequented by Castro, where it was expected that he could insert the pills into his food or drink. It appears that the scheme failed because Castro ceased to visit that particular restaurant. Following the Bay of Pigs there was a standdown in this operation.

Comment: While little is known of the delivery channels beyond the exile leader, this arrangement appears to have depended on an individual inside Cuba, who obviously knew about a plan to assassinate Castro by poison. The people who approached the exile leader were members of the Syndicate, which apparently already had contact with him. If the man in the restaurant revealed his secret, he would not have had basis for attributing the plan to the U. S.

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Government, as the exile leader understood only that the sponsors were a private group. The exile leader's son-in-law, with whom he had close associations during that period, probably knew of the activity but the true details were no more available to him than to the father-in-law. It would not have been impossible for these Cubans to have dropped some version of the story in the Miami Cuban community, with dramatic embellishments; however, attribution to the U.S. Government would have had to be supplied as the cover story did not, of itself, afford the basis for such a conclusion.

April 1962 - June 1963

The earlier exile mechanism was reactivated in April 1962 by a new CIA case officer who took over the contacts with the Los Angeles Syndicate member. New pills were prepared, the first set having been destroyed. This effort seems to have started with a revival of the restaurant scheme that had failed previously. The exile leader also requested arms and equipment. That which could be procured commercially was delivered to him; some of the requested items could only be obtained from the U.S. Government and were omitted from the delivery. The Syndicate representative, posing as a representative of private business interests,

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would not have had access to U. S. Government equipment and limiting the supply of arms to that commercially available was consistent with his posture.

On 21 June 1962 it was reported that a team of three men had been dispatched to Cuba. These men were to recruit others to carry out any plan that developed, taking the opportunity to act if the occasion presented itself. The names of these men are not known, if in fact they existed. We have no knowledge of what happened to them.

Additionally three so-called militia men were scheduled to be dispatched to Cuba by the exile leader, in September 1962, with the reported assignment of penetrating Castro's bodyguard. There were continued delays in the departure of these individuals and it is doubtful that they ever left on their mission.

In February 1963 the Syndicate go-between was told that the operation would be terminated. Consideration was given as to how to phase out the relationship with the exile leader without causing any additional difficulties. The last face-to-face meeting between the CIA officer and the Syndicate representative was in June 1963.

Comment: The cover for the operation continued to be the Syndicate contact with the description that he

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represented a group of private clients with financial interests in Cuba. The three men who reportedly were dispatched to Cuba would know no more than the exile leader. These individuals could have assumed more than they knew, but from what is known of the arrangements the basis for doing so was non-existent.

In addition to the exile leader and his son-in-law, one new personality was introduced to the operation, apparently a subordinate of the Syndicate contact through whom the CIA officer dealt with the exile leader. He probably knew that the U. S. Government was involved.

This phase of the plan introduced new individuals who knew of a plan to assassinate Castro. The exile leader and the members of his group had no basis for knowing the true nature of the support for the operation. Such descriptions as they may have given to the operation had no basis for differing materially from other exile plots and description of them, except in this instance there was a patron. The exile leader was known otherwise as one of the leaders receiving some CIA support,

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however separate and distinct from the assassination plan.. This could have provided a basis for speculation, in Cuba, that CIA (and therefore the U. S. Government) was behind it.

November 1963 - June 1965

A third involvement in a plan to assassinate Castro related to a contact with Rolando Cubela Secades, a man highly placed in the Castro government. Cubela had been contacted originally in March 1961 in Mexico City where he was attending a leftist-sponsored conference. He was met from time to time subsequently, but there were no arrangements involving assassination until November 1963.

During meetings in various locations in Scandinavia in July and August 1962, Cubela spoke of his desire to do something about changing the government of Cuba, the elimination of Castro being among the things that he discussed. However, during a 10-11 August 1962 meeting, when a CIA employee used the word "assassinate" Cubela found it objectionable. Agency instructions to the field ordered that Cubela be given no "physical elimination mission." Conversations with him continued, but not much of substance developed.

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Cubela was met again in [REDACTED] Paris, France, in September and October 1963 during which he discussed actions he might take against the Castro regime. During these discussions Cubela requested a high powered rifle with telescopic sites which could be used to kill Castro; the request was turned down with the admonition by the person to whom he was talking (who represented himself as speaking for Robert Kennedy) that the U. S. did not do such things.

In late 1963, as Cubela had continued to express interest in equipment, various courses of action were considered. Finally, a ballpoint pen was rigged as a hypodermic syringe that could be used to administer poison. A CIA case officer met with Cubela on 22 November 1963 in Paris, at which time he delivered the pen. This was the very date upon which President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Relationships with Cubela continued, including his eventually being supplied with arms, both by cache in Cuba and personal delivery by an intermediary in Spain. In June 1965 CIA decided to terminate contacts with Cubela and his group because of concern over their security. Cubela's arrest was announced on 1 March 1966 and he was tried publicly, at which time he confessed, although his associations with CIA were not made a part of his public confession.

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Comment: Earlier discussions with Cubela concerning moves against the Castro regime included discussion by him of the elimination of Castro; this was rebuffed by CIA representatives. When CIA finally decided to give Cubela equipment with which he could commit an assassination, its delivery was the very date upon which President Kennedy was killed.

Cubela knew that he was in touch with representatives of the U. S. Government but there was no basis for him to believe that he had U. S. Government support for the assassination of Castro prior to the time of the death of John F. Kennedy. We cannot state with any certainty that Latin exaggerations may not have translated Cubela's earlier general discussions with CIA into specific plans for the assassination of Castro, and were so described by him to his colleagues.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that the direct participants in the first effort involving the Syndicate would have become identified or told what they knew. The original intended assassin sought sanctuary in a diplomatic installation where he had every reason to not tell his story.

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The subsequent involvement of the exile leader and his son-in-law provided additional persons who could have spoken of the plan to someone, but their knowledge of the backers was well covered and they would have had to supply the missing ingredients from their own thoughts.

The reported involvement of a man in a restaurant frequented by Castro provides a possible source of information that someone planned Castro's assassination, and this individual seems to have been a part of the first effort (1960-61) and initially in the second one (1962-63). But again his knowledge would have been limited.

The reported dispatch of three men into Cuba to recruit assets for action also provided individuals who could be a source for reports of assassination plotting against Castro.

In all these instances, however, the cover story for the activity would appear to be reasonably secure, on the surface, i.e., Syndicate representatives and/or private business people were the ones involved in the activity.

The involvement of Cubela had not progressed to the point of agreeing that assassination was a possible course of action, and Cubela had no basis for making such statements, until after the death of President Kennedy. We have no assurances, however, as to how he may have dramatized his conversations in reporting to

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his colleagues, or what they may have passed on.

There was considerable independent plotting in the Cuban exile community in the Miami area, aimed at the Castro government and its leader. Castro was doubtless aware of this generally, through the Cuban Intelligence Service, and probably was aware of some of the more specific plans the exiles may have made. As an example, there was a report of such plotting -- including reference to the Syndicate -- as late as mid-1964. The form in which this sort of activity may have been reported to Castro is entirely speculative, but it is safe to postulate some Latin exaggeration. While a firm basis for attribution to the U. S. Government would not exist, one could speculate that Castro would attribute it to the U. S. Government and CIA regardless of how it came to him.

There were various people in the U. S. who, in one way or another, came to know of the two episodes (1960-61 and 1962-63) involving representatives of the Syndicate. This would include individuals who only made introductions, individuals who were a party to only one aspect or another of the activity, or who had more extensive knowledge that they could divulge to others who were not involved. It is reasonable to postulate that the members of the Syndicate did not engage in loose talk, but we have no basis for

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knowing what use they may have wished to make of their knowledge when they were still attempting to save their gambling rights in Cuba. The last gambling casino was closed in September 1961 and no real advantage was to be gained for the Syndicate thereafter in revealing this information. There were press reports in August 1963 connecting Syndicate figures with earlier CIA intelligence collection in Cuba, but without reference to involvement in assassination. At a subsequent date information concerning the involvement of Syndicate representatives the first two operations mentioned in this paper became known to a Washington attorney and probably through him to newspaper columnist Drew Pearson. The probable source of this latter story was the Syndicate representative who served as the intermediary during two undertakings.

One can speculate as to whether or not Castro actually learned of the plans discussed above and, if so, the detail that he could have learned. Assuming that he learned something--which is not all that clear--he would still have had to know enough detail to have divined that it was a U. S. Government action, as a basis for launching a counter action in the form of Lee Harvey Oswald, as has been postulated by some. The basic issue arises from speculation, and speculation cannot satisfactorily resolve it.

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